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CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

Kennedy and King: getting assassination answers

JFK ACT
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The suicide of George de Mohrenschildt came soon after he reportedly learned that he was being sought to testify before the House Select Committee on Assassinations. It was one more episode raising questions that demand the fullest investigation if the public is to be satisfied no effort has been spared in getting at the truth of the nation's assassination tragedies.

The name of Mr. de Mohrenschildt, a Russian-born professor who knew Lee Harvey Oswald in Dallas, was unfamiliar to most of the public. But he had testified before the Warren Commission during its investigation of the John Kennedy assassination. Some of the testimony has never been made public. A member of the House commmittee said that new information had made Mr. de Mohrenschildt a "crucial witness."

Certain "new" questions, rumors, and information – in both the Kennedy and Martin Luther King cases – tend to be the same things surfacing and resurfacing over the years, even after close students have exhaustively pursued them. But, as we have said before, the public needs assurance that all the leads have been followed up, all the evidence evaluated by some unimpeachable authority.

One problem in choosing this authority is that agencies of the government such as the CIA and FBI must themselves be scrutinized in the light of some of the questions raised. Maximum objectivity, exercised without fear or favor, requires an independent board of inquiry. Hence our advocacy of such a panel – with members of the highest repute and a range of credentials satisfactory to the doubters – when the future of the House assassinations committee was being debated last month.

Now the House committee has pulled itself together sufficiently to win authorization to the end of next year. Meanwhile, the committee's former chief counsel, Richard Sprague, recommends depoliticizing the reexamination of the Kennedy and King murders by turning it over to a special prosecutor. This sounds inviting in view of the Watergate special prosecutors' success. But a special prosecutor customarily prepares evidence for a grand jury with some expectation of prosecution. Unlike Watergate, the long-past assassinations do not present the questions likely for grand jury action. The proposal for a special prosecutor ought to be rejected in favor of a board of inquiry – with the necessary subpoena power to get at the facts from all sources.

But neither an independent panel nor a special prosecutor is likely to be designated soon. The immediate challenge is for the House assassinations committee to upset predictions and prove itself worthy of the task. For one thing it should remain as open as possible without lapsing into grandstanding, political expediency, or the kind of tactics displayed in connection with an alleged Mafia figure last month. The committee knew he would refuse to testify on constitutional grounds. Yet it held a public hearing and repeatedly questioned him, getting the expected lack of response. This made for a kind of spectacle – but hardly to the purpose of the committee's mandate.

The Senate Watergate committee rightly eschewed such spectacle by accepting private testimony from those who claimed constitutional privilege. A member of the assassinations committee once expressed the hope that it would do such a good job that it would improve the image of Congress, as the Watergate committee and the House impeachment inquiry had done. It will have to go some to recover lost ground and do so now. But the opportunity is there. If the House committee shows no progress, the pressure for an alternative investigation can only grow.

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Sprague was on "Who's Who" on 19 April 1977.

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